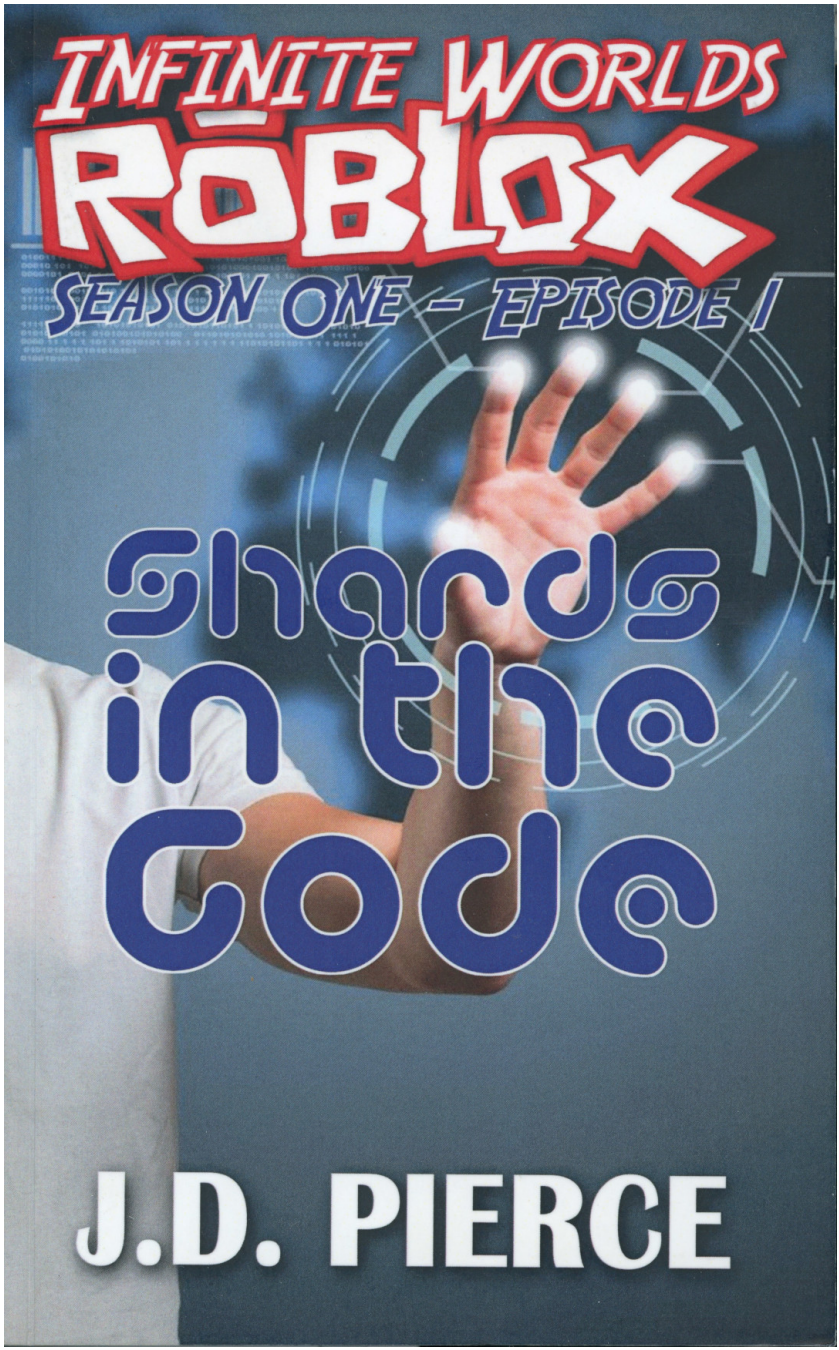
INFINITE WORLDS
ROBLOX
SEASON ONE - EPISODE 1
Shards in the Code
J.D. PIERCE

Shards in the Code

Infinite Worlds ROBLOX

Season One – Episode 1

by J.D. Pierce

I wrote this book for you.

J.D. Pierce

Summary

The battle to save Earth begins online.

Season One - Episode 1

Max is your average teenager who loves to build worlds in the online game, ROBLOX. But when something extraordinary happens inside Level Arcadia, his most detailed world, he soon discovers that everything in the real world is in grave danger from an alien invasion that only he can prevent.

INFINITE WORLDS ROBLOX unfolds over six books of approximately 150 pages each (20,000 words) with the first five books ending in epic cliffhangers.

This book is a work of fiction. References to real people, events, establishments, organizations, or locales are intended only to provide a sense of authenticity, and are used fictitiously. All other characters, and all incidents and dialogue, are drawn from the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real.

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Prologue

The steady impact of the battering ram against the main gate echoed throughout the roughhewn stone castle halls like a repeating cannon shot.

Thomas was already fully awake, and sitting upright in bed, when the queen rushed into her young son's bedroom.

Her panicked look told him that something was wrong, but not what. For the first time in his life, he was looking at his mother's face without its permanent warm smile.

"What's happening, Mother?" he asked.

She scooped him out of bed. "I am sending you somewhere safe."

She dashed to the fireplace built flush into the rough stone wall and placed her hand on a grey stone to one side of the mantle.

A faint blue line ran down the length of the stone, scanning her palm. The stone flashed a bright green and the fire immediately extinguished. The fireplace split noiselessly in half revealing a darkened space beyond.

Lights flickered to life in recessed panels along the edges of the ceiling, illuminating the long corridor that glimmered with polished metal and smooth plastic in stark contrast to the rustic stonework of the castle and surrounding township.

Thomas's eyes grew large. "Mom…?"

"It's okay, sweetie," she replied as the fireplace slid closed behind them, silencing the constant crashing of the battering ram against the main gate. Once inside the tunnel, it felt as if they were cut off from the whole world.

She hurried down the corridor with Thomas in her arms. At the other end, she paused before a closed door. A red light blinked to one side of the door accompanied by a soft female voice devoid of

emotion. “Please state your authorization code.”

“Tango Hotel Oscar. Two Eight Six.”

The light blinked green twice and the door opened with a rush of air. Beyond the enclosed corridor, the room opened into a massive cavern-like space with blue lights publishing along the ceiling, walls, and floor in a fluid motion.

Thomas’s father, the king, stood in the center with his hands resting on the side of an open crate built into the floor. The blue lights that started on the ceiling, ran down the walls, and continued along the floor all raced toward the crate at the center of the room.

The king looked at Thomas and his mother as they entered the massive room.

Thomas could see a single tear running down his father’s cheek. His father had always been strong and powerful, afraid of nothing. Even when he had been wounded in battle with a neighboring kingdom, he had never shed a tear.

This, in combination with his mother’s serious face, told him something was horribly wrong.

Thomas’s mother set him down as they reached the center of the room.

Thomas looked inside the crate and his mouth fell open.

His twin brother, Cade, was lying perfectly still inside. What happened to his brother?

Thomas looked up in alarm. “Is he dead?”

His mother bent down. “No, sweetie. We sent him somewhere safe.”

Thomas looked down at the still form lying in the crate. He couldn’t even see him breathing. Cade certainly looked dead.

The king knelt down and placed a warm hand on Thomas’s

shoulder. “The rebels have breached the main gate and will be here in minutes. I need you to get inside next to your brother.”

Thomas looked into his father’s eyes for a hint that everything would be okay. “What’s happening?”

“I’m afraid it’s a little hard to explain. Maybe if we had more time…”

His father’s voice cracked, the pain written on his face sent Thomas’s heart pounding harder in his chest.

His mother finished for him. “Your father and I need you and your brother to be safe. It is time for you to leave this place.”

“Leave?”

“Your brother has already been sent on ahead.”

Thomas looked into the crate at his brother. He looked at his father. “I don’t understand.”

An explosion echoed from the corridor he and his mother had used to escape his room.

She looked back and pulled a strange device out from under her skirt. “I’ll keep them back as long as I can.”

She ran toward the corridor and lightning exploded from the front of her device, discharging into the depths followed by pained screams.

The king lifted Thomas and placed him into the crate next to his brother, laying him into a comfortable seat built into the base of the crate.

“We will send someone to find you when it’s safe. Your mother and I love you very much.”

“Wait! Thomas cried, but his father pressed his hand on a panel on the side of the crate and the blue lights on the ceiling reversed direction.

Suddenly, his whole body felt lighter and a wave of dizziness overcame him.

And then nothing.

Chapter 1

At fifteen years of age, Max felt invulnerable in nearly every situation he found himself. But at the present moment, he was feeling very vulnerable.

He was pinned down in the corner, paintballs splattering against the walls near him.

He had already been hit twice in the faceplate in previous games. His attempts to wipe away the paint had only resulted in smearing it, so he had a small clear window of visibility.

He was breathing heavily from the fast sprint into his current position near the enemy base and his hair was matted with a mixture of sweat and colorful paint.

Unfortunately, the top to his hopper had come loose as he dove behind the barrier and he'd lost nearly all his paintballs.

He popped up and fired his remaining three rounds. He took out a player on the opposing team before he dropped back down to avoid the return barrage as paintballs exploded all around him.

He was now out of ammunition.

If he was playing at a regulated outdoor field, instead of inside an old abandoned shopping mall, he could hold his marker in the air and safely walk to home base to get more paintballs.

But he was not.

The father of one of the kids at school he hung with owned the property. The father said he was waiting for the economy to improve before knocking down the dilapidated two-story mall and re-developing the land into the popular blended living and shopping complexes that seemed to be popping up everywhere.

So every Saturday, Max and about twenty other kids took over the mall to conduct intense battle simulations.

It also meant they played by their own rules.

And those rules meant that when someone was out of ammunition, they became the perfect target. And today, that target had to deal with the cold autumn Virginia air that blew through the abandoned mall, which hardened the paintballs making it hurt more before they broke apart.

Noah, a boy the same age as Max with red curly hair, sprinted across the open space between barriers, narrowly dodging the flying paintballs that tracked his dash from safety as he headed for Max's position.

Max saw him coming, but wasn't worried.

Noah was on his team.

Noah safely evaded every paintball propelled at him and skidded to his knees next to Max.

"Noah," Max exclaimed. "Why did you do that?"

Noah reached into the pocket of his combat vest and pulled out a full bag of paintballs.

"I couldn't let my best friend go down without a fair fight."

"You shouldn't have risked it. There are only five minutes left in the game. You could have survived if you stayed in the base."

Noah topped off his hopper from the bag of paintballs and smiled. "Where's the fun in that? I'd rather die by your side."

Max filled his hopper and tucked the empty bag into the pocket of his combat vest. Max snapped down the top of his hopper and looked at Noah. "Let's get that flag."

Noah smiled behind his full-faced mask.

"Now you're talking."

In a practiced move, like highly trained soldiers, they rounded

opposite corners of the barrier and fired at anything that moved.

All around them, players dropped to the ground in mock death and Max and Noah's paintballs burst on their chests and faceplates.

They were getting closer to the enemy's base, and their flag, when Max saw movement out of the corner of his eye.

He barely had time to react before he heard the rapid sputter of the electro pneumatic marker as it spit fifty rounds per second at him and Noah.

They both jerked in all directions, selling the kill as they were quickly covered in paint. They both collapsed to the ground as if dead.

Noah shakily lifted himself to all fours and crawled over to Max, coughing spasmodically.

"It… it was an honor to die by your side."

Noah let out a dramatic gasp, collapsed to the ground, rolled over on his back, and stuck his arms and legs in the air like a dead bug.

A blurred shadowy figure stood over Max.

"I win," the shadow remarked and then bent down, offering a hand to help Max up.

He took the hand and stood up, pulling off his mask so he could see who had bested him.

His opponent pulled away her mask and let her long blond hair fall down her back, shaking it out. One side of her mouth curled up in a half smile.

"On or offline, I'm still better," she said.

Max wiped away the paint that had splattered through the grill of his mask and covered his lips in stale tasting goop. "It's not like you're out saving the world or anything, Terri. It's just a game."

Her smile faded.

“That’s the difference between us Maxi. I treat everything like it’s the real thing. I’m never just playing around. You of all people should be glad for that. Because of me, your first year of college is almost paid for.”

“Yeah, well, I created PaintMall to replicate the mall so I could practice.”

Terri shook her head. “And you asked me to code it. The AI and player ranking I scripted made it huge. Now we’re making bank off of it.”

Max straightened up to his full height. Despite being a year younger than Terri, he was still an inch taller. “Care to put your money where your mouth is?”

Terri smiled again. “Anytime. Anywhere.”

“After dinner tonight, let’s finish this online.”

“What’s the wager?”

Max tilted his head to the side as he thought.

“If I win, you do my homework for a week.”

Terri’s smile widened. “My dad asked me to clear out the gutters on the roof next weekend. I’m thinking you’ll do it instead.”

Max stuck out his hand. “Tonight then?”

Terri took his hand and they shook.

Noah’s eyes narrowed when he noticed that their handshake lasted more than it should have and they held their stare a little too long.

Noah watched as Max and Terri turned away from each other, right before Max disappeared around the far barricade, he glanced back at Terri.

Uh oh, thought Noah.

Chapter 2

Max took another bite of his sandwich and typed the last sentence on his essay. He clicked the save icon right before closing the word app on his tablet, opened his email, and sent the homework to his teacher as an attachment.

Because of his dysgraphia, making his handwriting practically indecipherable, the teacher had agreed to let him type out any written homework assignments and send them to her.

It meant he had the benefit of using a spell-checker for all his writing assignments. It also meant he finished much more quickly than if he had to write them out by hand.

He shut down the tablet and fired up the desktop computer where he did most of his building and playing.

He loved building worlds.

Ever since he could remember, he was always playing with the editing programs that let him create his own levels in games. Some of them were just map editors; while others gave him a higher degree of modification. He often found himself staying up late into the night creating new levels. He spent more time building than playing the games themselves. But he was limited.

And then Noah told him about ROBLOX, an online sandbox where he could create anything he wanted and share it with the world. For the first time in his life, he wasn't constrained to the original game creator's world.

He could finally build anything, but his worlds were empty and devoid of life. That's where Terri came in. Her dad was a programmer, and a very good one. It seemed like he was moving from one company to another for a hefty raise, all without leaving the den of their house at the end of Max's block.

Her father had begun teaching her computer languages from an early age, so it was a given that she easily picked up the Lua

scripting language used in ROBLOX and helped Max bring the worlds he had created to life.

On the shelves lining the wall of his room were countless models he had built using the world's most popular brick building system when he was younger. His biggest one was over four feet in length and strained the support brackets that secured the shelf to the wall.

But they paled in comparison to the worlds he had created online. While he had created several popular combat games, his pièce de résistance was his sci-fi RPG, Level Arcadia, that replicated an entire futuristic city complete with restaurants, shopping malls, a police station, a hospital, and tons of indoor environments.

His plan was to create such a detailed environment that it would enable a sandbox RPG game that behaved like living in a real world. Despite being the creator, there were so many places he had created over the past three years that he had lost track of all the indoor places he could visit in his own world.

Terri had been working hard crafting nearly a hundred unique artificial intelligence scripts that could be used across the thousands of non-player characters that populated his city.

She assured him that, despite using the same scripts for multiple NPCs, his world would feel like a full living world; even if only one player was logged in.

While he was building his world, and populating it with some pretty sophisticated AIs, he had set up a pay-wall to keep only the most interested players out of his beta world.

Despite the access fee, he still had hundreds of players pay to check out his world. After a while, everyone else stopped coming by since development and scripting hadn't happened as quickly as he wanted, but there was still one player in particular who logged into his world nearly every day.

That player, who went by the profile DigiCalvin, had spent a lot of time in his world. According to the logs Terri had programmed to track user activities, DigiCalvin spent a lot of time in Arcadia.

More time than seemed humanly possible for someone who needed to go to school or work, let alone eat and sleep.

Maybe DigiCalvin was some unemployed adult who enjoyed getting lost in Max's living world rather than living in the real world.

Regardless, Max had never been able to locate DigiCalvin in person. But it wasn't due to lack of trying. It was just that his world was so massive; it was easy to get lost in the thriving megalopolis that was Max's personal vision of life in the future.

Even if it was an artificial world that only existed in the twenty-inch LCD monitor in his room, to Max it was as real as the world that demanded chores, homework, and where he was still treated like a little kid.

It was why he created Level Arcadia.

He wanted a place to hang out with his friends that was as real as possible.

Max glanced at the clock.

He still had at least half an hour before he had to meet Terri, or Sweet16 as she was called online, in the PaintMall arena for a one-on-one match to settle once and for all who the better player was.

He logged into ROBLOX and accessed Level Arcadia.

As soon as the level objects loaded, the city drew itself quickly into view, filling in first the closer objects and then adding the ones farther away.

Just like all the other times, the only other player logged in was DigiCalvin.

It was time for Max to try again to find him and ask why he was always here.

Chapter 3

The first thing Max did was head for the car rental facility he had built. Being a futuristic city, he was going to be renting a flying car. It was the fastest way to get around the massive city and hopefully, he would spot DigiCalvin walking around.

Max ran two blocks and climbed into the transport tube that raised him a hundred stories above ground level until he was at the rental car level.

He stepped out and walked straight into the rental shop.

He clicked on the question mark above the retail counter clerk and, in no time, a shiny new yellow hover car appeared just outside the door to the rental office. It was great to be the creator of this world. He never needed to worry about running out of money.

Max jumped into the hover car and flew out over the city.

He scrolled his mouse wheel until he could see farther around him as he flew around.

After his fifth time crossing back and forth over the city, he still hadn't found DigiCalvin. And now, according to the menu on the screen, a new player had joined.

Max looked at the name listed below his on the screen.

Who was AgentSmith?

He had never seen that player before.

The first thing that came to mind was the names of the agents in that Will Smith movie where aliens lived secretly on the Earth.

Max chuckled to himself as he completed another circuit around the city in the hover car. Players came up with the craziest names sometimes.

He frowned at the monitor.

This wasn't working.

He was no closer to finding DigiCalvin than before. He had to get closer to the ground in order to see the name pop up above the player avatar. And that was only if DigiCalvin was somewhere on the ground and not inside a building.

There were no guarantees.

It was then Max slapped his forehead with an open palm. He was going about this the wrong way. He was thinking like this was real life.

But it wasn't.

He could contact DigiCalvin using the chat feature.

He tapped the forward slash key and opened the chat bar along the bottom of the screen.

"Hello DigiCalvin," he typed.

He waited for several seconds for a reply.

When there was none, he typed again.

"Are you there DigiCalvin?"

He watched the screen for some form of reply.

The only reply he received was DigiCalvin logging out of his world.

AgentSmith joined the conversation.

"Do you know who this DigiCalvin is?"

"Nope," Max replied. "I've never been able to strike up a conversation with him. I guess he's shy."

And with that, AgentSmith logged out.

Max glanced at his clock. It was time for him to meet Terri in

PaintMall and show her who was boss.

He couldn't keep the smile off his face as he logged in and started the game. Once he took her out, he was going to get a week off from homework.

Chapter 4

Max ascended the ladder and scraped more leaves from the gutters of Terri's house. He had really needed that win. His RPG world was nearly complete and, if he hadn't had to do his own homework this week, he could have finished.

He heard Terri's annoyingly smug voice below him. "Hurry up. My dad will be home soon, and if he sees someone else doing this I'm gonna be grounded for a month."

Max reached as far as he could and scooped more leaves out of the gutter, letting them rain down on his hapless victim.

"Hey! Watch it!" Terri yelped as she jumped back, dusting bits of dry leaves out of her hair.

Max shuffled down the ladder. "That about does it."

"Let me see," she said as she climbed up the ladder and inspected his work. "I guess that'll do." she continued as she dropped from the ladder and landed squarely on her feet.

Max finished dusting bits of dirt and leaves from his jacket. "Have you had a chance to code the weapons for Arcadia?"

"Yeah," she replied. "I uploaded the code last night before bed. You should be able to go into any store and purchase weapons now."

Max smiled. "What are you doing right now?"

Terri smiled back. "You think you can take me?"

"Arcadia is much larger than PaintMall. The question you should be asking yourself is if you can stop me."

She glanced at her phone. "I have one hour."

"That's all I need," Max yelled as he dashed across the yard and vaulted the low hedges on the way back to his house.

Chapter 5

Max pulled open the storm door to the kitchen that doubled as a screen door in the summer. It swung open quicker than normal and banged noisily against the wall.

“Easy,” his mother said from her position at the stove. “The air cylinder is still broken. You’re going to break the window if you’re not careful!”

“Sorry Mom!” Max spat out as he rushed past her, the smell of stewed tomatoes filling his nostrils.

He could see her shaking her head as he climbed the stairs two at a time. He didn’t want to give Terri a chance to secure a position before he was able to get in. He sat down at his computer and turned on the monitor. He always left the computer running and only turned off the monitor so he didn’t have to wait for the computer to boot up. It really helped in situations like this.

He logged in and, as soon as the city rendered around his avatar, he took one step before an explosion ripped his avatar to pieces.

Max sat back in his chair.

No fair!

He activated the chat bar.

“NO CAMPING!” he shouted.

“That wasn’t me,” came the reply from Sweet16. “Look.”

As soon as his avatar regenerated, he adjusted the camera and saw another explosion take place two blocks away. He looked up to see two hover cars, one chasing the other.

What was going on?

He looked to see who was logged in. The only other players in the game, besides he and Terri, were DigiCalvin and AgentSmith.

Why were they fighting?

“Hey guys. Why are you fighting?” he typed.

He watched as someone jumped on top of the rear hover car and fired at the lead car.

The lead car exploded in flames.

A moment later, AgentSmith appeared on top of Max’s head.

AgentSmith suddenly jumped away, firing into the sky as he ran. DigiCalvin’s hover car caught fire and tilted wildly to one side as DigiCalvin jumped back in and guided it into a controlled crash into the middle of the city.

Max clicked the run option and took off after AgentSmith, who was already heading for the crash site.

On the way, Max took a moment to enter a shop and purchased a shotgun. He hoped he wouldn’t need it, but it looked like a battle was taking place and he didn’t want to be left out of it.

He caught up with AgentSmith, who was ducked behind a wall. Bullets pinged off the low wall as AgentSmith stayed down out of sight.

Max peeked around the corner and noticed the hover car had crashed into the fountain at the center of town. The fountain had been destroyed and the building the car had crashed into was on fire.

Floating just over a large chunk of toppled fountain he saw DigiCalvin’s name. Max was able to follow their conversation in the chat window as DigiCalvin popped up and fired several more shots at AgentSmith.

“AgentJones already told me you work for the people who killed my parents.”

Killed his parents? Thought Max. What was he talking about?

“No,” replied AgentSmith. “Your parents are still alive and they sent me to bring you home.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“How about I toss out my gun and come out without you shooting me?”

There was a short pause before DigiCalvin responded. “Toss your weapon out.”

AgentSmith tossed his gun into the courtyard and stood with his hands in the air. He slowly walked out in front of the wall and faced the downed hover car.

DigiCalvin came out of hiding, pointing his gun at AgentSmith. “How do I know I can trust you?”

“Your parents asked me to tell you that they miss you and are ready for you to come home.”

“What about the rebels?”

“They have been defeated. It is safe for you to return.”

“That’s not what AgentJones told me yesterday.”

“There are still a few rebels, but they have been scattered to the four corners of the galaxy and no longer threaten the kingdom. But they can still get to you unless I bring you home.”

AgentSmith slowly walked forward, closing the distance between him and DigiCalvin.

From his angle, Max could see that AgentSmith had another weapon strapped to his back. He kept walking toward DigiCalvin and slowly lowered his arms as he talked.

“AgentJones is lying to you. Your parents are alive and they expect me to bring you back to them.”

If AgentSmith was actually surrendering, why hadn’t he tossed

out both weapons? It was then he realized that the weapon on AgentSmith's back was a short range weapon that Terri had designed. In another two studs, the range would be perfect to use against DigiCalvin. As long as it was pointed in his general direction, it would hit him with its widespread effect.

Max raised his shotgun and pointed it at the back of AgentSmith.

Max noticed the telltale sign of AgentSmith reaching for the weapon on his back, so Max fired.

AgentSmith crumpled to pieces and disappeared.

DigiCalvin dove behind the crashed car.

Max tossed out his shotgun and walked out with his hands raised. "I don't want to hurt you," he typed quickly.

DigiCalvin slowly peeked out from behind the burning hover car. "You're the creator of this world?"

"Yes," Max replied.

"Why did you put in weapons?"

"Why not?"

"You gave my enemies a way to kill me."

"Kill you? You won't die if you get hit. You'll just regenerate at the starting spawn point."

DigiCalvin stood up and lowered his weapon.

"I am not like you," DigiCalvin said and then ran off. Max was still standing there when AgentSmith ran past him and started firing as DigiCalvin disappeared around the corner of a building.

AgentSmith disappeared after him. Max thought about following them when Terri came running up and surveyed the crashed hover car and damaged fountain. "What's going on?"

Just then, DigiCalvin logged out; followed quickly by AgentSmith.

Chapter 6

Max sat back and looked around his room. He did it to remind himself that what had just happened was still inside a game and wasn't the real world.

As weird as DigiCalvin had behaved in the past, never answering his chat request and staying hidden while spending hours in his world, the last thing he had said before running off had been even stranger.

What did he mean when he said he was not like Max? Was he one of the developers at the company?

Terri stood in front of Max, jumping up and down. "What's going on here?"

Max leaned forward and continued typing. "Two other players bought weapons and went after each other. But it was weird how they acted like it was real. Like it was more than just a game."

"At least the new Al scripts are working," Terri commented as NPCs in police uniform swarmed the area and began cordoning off the area around the crash while other NPCs seemed drawn to the crash and gawked at the damages to the fountain.

A hover fire truck sprayed water on the burning wreckage and the building, extinguishing the fire and preventing it from spreading. Terri had finished the fire crew Al before she would even consider activating the fire spreading scripts.

Max marveled at how well Terri's scripts created a vibrant world as NPC emergency personnel interacted with other NPCs, the police gathered statements from eyewitnesses, and news crews arrived to document the event.

An NPC pointed toward Max and a police avatar wandered over. "A witness tells me that you helped stop the battle that took place here. We would like you to come to the police station and provide a statement at your earliest convenience."

Max stared at the avatar that behaved far more human than he should have. “Excuse me?”

“I need you to stop by the police station to give your statement as to what you saw happen here.”

“Of course.”

“Thank you,” the police avatar said and then wandered off to push back some spectators that were pushing against the holographic ribbon that blocked off the scene of destruction.

Max leaned away from the monitor and picked up his cell phone. He dialed the number from memory and, placing the phone on speaker, set it on the desk next to his keyboard.

Terri answered after the first ring.

Max didn’t wait for her to even say hello. “Did you just see what that police avatar did?”

“I sure did.”

“How did you program the AI to do that?”

“I didn’t.”

“Well, somebody had to.”

“Hold on,” she said, and then her avatar disappeared as she logged out. “I’m going into Studio to look at the police AI.”

“While you’re there, look at the general AI too. They are gathering around the crash site to look at it, like they are actually interested in what happened. It’s just creepy.”

Max watched as avatars in construction hardhats cleared the wreckage and quickly repaired the damaged building and rebuilt the fountain. Within two minutes, everything had been cleaned up and it looked as if nothing had ever happened.

Terri’s voice echoed through the tiny speaker on his cell phone.

“That’s weird.”

Max turned his attention from the monitor to the phone, as if looking at it meant he was looking at Terri. “What’s weird?”

“The Al base code hasn’t been touched. But there’s a whole bunch of add-on code.”

“Who added it?”

“Checking now.”

There was a short pause as she was reading through lines of coding before she spoke again. “Nobody. They generated that extra code themselves. But it’s not all complete. It’s just shards of code.”

“What? How is that possible?”

“It isn’t possible,” was her ominous reply.

Chapter 7

Max stared at the phone, ignoring the realistic behavior taking place in his RPG world as avatars dispersed and went back about their pre-programmed lives once the crash had been fully cleared away and everything rebuilt to the way it was before.

“Then how did it happen?” he asked.

“Wait a sec,” she said.

When he couldn’t take the silence after nearly a minute, he picked up the phone and held the microphone close.

“How did that happen?” he said more forcefully.

“I said wait,” was her only reply.

Max let out an exasperated rush of air and looked at the screen just as the name DigiCalvin popped back up again on the list of players.

Max nearly dropped the phone as he placed it next to the keyboard. He spun his avatar around and headed back for the main spawn point. If he could catch up with DigiCalvin, maybe he could find out where he always hid.

Max came into view of the main spawn point, but DigiCalvin was nowhere to be seen. He was already gone.

Max checked the list. DigiCalvin was still logged in.

Terri finally broke her silence. “I just checked my bandwidth logs. Whoever added that code did it at the exact same time I was uploading them. Only, they updated my files right before I sent them. All those changes are in the files on my system.”

Max hadn’t been paying attention, all his focus had been on finding DigiCalvin as he ran first down one street and then another.

“What?”

“I think someone piggybacked my server connection and updated the code right before I uploaded it.”

“Who can do that?”

“I’ve never heard of anyone being able to do that, ever. But it’s the only logical explanation no matter how crazy that sounds.”

“Hey, you’re the programmer. If you say that’s what happened, I believe you.”

“But it still doesn’t make sense. My dad has the best network equipment money can buy. Nobody could connect to my system without me knowing about it.”

Max was still running down streets at random, hoping to run into DigiCalvin by accident. “Go ahead and log back in. I need your help.”

“Okay.”

He saw the name, Sweet16, pop up on the list. “I’m in. What do you need?”

“You cover the lower half of the map…”

“What the…!” she exclaimed and then Max heard her typing furiously on her keyboard.

Max leaned closer to the phone. “What’s going on?”

“Someone’s hacking my system right now. He’s trying to remove the weapon scripts. No you don’t. Hah! Caught you! Try to disconnect now. Nobody pulls one over on Sweet16.”

“What’s going on?” Max asked again.

“I set up a hacker grabber that holds a connection and keeps it from being severed electronically. The only way he can break the connection is to cut the physical wires connecting our two systems. Now I’m running a trace to see where… what? That can’t be right.”

“What is it?”

“Whoever connected to my system is doing it from inside one of the virtual terminals I created in Arcadia.” Terri appeared around the corner and ran up to Max. “Let’s go see who it is.”

She ran off.

Max clicked the run button and still had trouble keeping up with her. She took them into one of the cybercafés that populated the simulated city.

It was ironic to create a cybercafé in a fully cyber world, but Max wanted to create as realistic an environment as possible.

Terri stopped at an empty terminal in the back corner of the café. A cup of coffee was still sitting next to it, like the owner had left in a hurry.

She pointed to the screen on the tiny monitor. “That’s my desktop.”

Max moved closer and froze in surprise. It was like looking at one of those infinity paintings that showed the area around the monitor again inside the monitor, with the smaller monitor showing the same thing.

Terri looked around the café. “He can’t have gone far. He’s still here, I know it.”

Max looked around, but all he could see were NPCs that made the café look like an active and thriving business. “How do you know?”

“Look at the list of names. DigiCalvin is still on it.”

“How do you know it was him?”

“There are only three of us in this world and whoever hacked my network did it from this virtual terminal. It wasn’t me. And, no offense, but it certainly wasn’t you.”

“None taken,” Max said even though he was a little offended. He

knew something about scripting. Maybe not as much as Terri, but he wasn't a dummy.

"So that leaves your friend, DigiCalvin," she added.

"He's not my friend. I still don't know who he is."

"He's always in here. He must know you somehow."

"I've tried to talk to him, but he always ignored me before today."

"He talked to you today?"

"Yea. Right after the battle with AgentSmith."

"What did he say?"

"He said he's not like me."

"Well, that's easy to say. Nobody's like you, Max."

"I'm not joking."

Terri snickered. "Neither am I."

Max spotted movement outside the window to the café. "There!" he said as he pointed at DigiCalvin running across the street.

Max and Terri broke into a run after him just as he disappeared between two buildings.

Terri broke away from him as they ran across the street. "You go that way. I'll go this way and cut him off."

"Got it," Max replied and dashed around the corner DigiCalvin had disappeared around only moments before.

Max zoomed way out to get a bird's eye view of the city as he ran. It was then he wished he hadn't created buildings hundreds of stories tall. He wasn't able to get the camera view high enough to see around the buildings so he could track DigiCalvin's escape.

He kept one eye on the player log as he ran.

DigiCalvin hadn't logged out yet, so there was a chance they might catch up with him.

He rounded the next corner and scanned the street ahead. DigiCalvin was nowhere to be seen. How was he running so fast? All the avatars should be set at the same speed, so at the very least they would stay the same distance from each other.

But DigiCalvin was gone.

As Max rounded the next corner, he slammed into Terri and they both stopped short.

Terri looked around her. "Where is he?"

Max zoomed out, but the buildings kept him from seeing the streets other than the one he was on. "I don't know. I didn't see which way he went."

The player list changed on the corner of his screen and caught his attention. Two more players had entered the world. He frowned at the names.

One was AgentSmith.

The other was AgentJones.

Max leaned forward to speak into his cell phone. "Terri, check out who just logged on."

"AgentSmith and AgentJones," she said. "Oh, real original."

Explosions boomed in the distance followed by two hover cars screaming overhead with lasers streaking between them.

"What is going on today?" Max said to himself.

"What?" Terri replied. "I didn't hear what you said."

Max blinked and shook his head. "Nothing. It's just that on the

first day you turned on the weapons, players have jumped in and started using them."

"I've been going over the player activity logs in Arcadia. Except for us, the only ones spending any time in here have been DigiCalvin and Agents Smith and Jones. According to the logs, anytime one of the agents jumps in, DigiCalvin leaves shortly after. I don't think they like each other."

Max thought back to the gunfight he had witnessed earlier. "I got the same impression."

There was an explosion and Max watched as a massive glass tower in the distance shattered, teetered back and forth, and then collapsed into the city below. The real world physics were working perfectly. It also meant that his world was being destroyed by the actions of only two players.

He opened the chat bar. "Cut it out you two."

Two more explosions reverberated on the other side of the city.

"If you don't stop now I will BAN BOTH OF YOU!!!" he typed.

AgentSmith logged out and the city fell silent again.

"Can we talk?" came a request from AgentJones.

"Sure," Max typed back.

"Where are you?" AgentJones asked.

"I can be at the fountain in the city center in less than a minute."

"I'll be there."

"Are you really going to meet that guy at the fountain?" Terri asked.

"Sure. Why not?"

"What are you going to tell him?"

“Just that he can’t go around destroying my city. If he wants to do that, he can build his own. While I’m gone, see if you can find DigiCalvin.”

“Ten four,” Terri said and jumped away down the street.

Max headed for the city center to meet with the player who called himself AgentJones. Maybe he would finally get down to the bottom of what was going on.

Chapter 8

Max stood at the fountain for several minutes before an avatar appeared from around the corner, pointing a gun at him. The text above the avatar identified him as AgentJones.

Max laughed out loud in his room.

“What’s so funny?” Terri asked from the still active cell phone.

“Just this yahoo is pointing a gun at me like I should be worried or something.”

To humor the other player, Max raised the hands on his avatar and typed in his response. “I’m unarmed.”

AgentJones lowered his weapon. “Don’t try anything or I will shoot you.”

“Fine. I won’t,” Max replied. “I wanted to ask that you guys stop destroying my city.”

AgentJones stopped in place. “Are you the mayor of this city?”

“Something like that, yes. If you want to go on a rampage of destruction, find another city.”

AgentJones looked around. “What is this place?”

“Can I lower my hands?”

“Of course.”

Max chuckled to himself as he lowered his avatar’s arms.

AgentJones looked around him. “What kind of world is this?”

“It’s an RPG?”

“RPG?”

“Yeah. A role playing game. Didn’t you read the description before you entered?”

AgentJones looked around him like he was confused. “There was no description at the entrance to this world. I followed the trail and it led me here.”

It was Max’s turn to be confused. “Trail?”

AgentJones raised his gun and pointed it at Max again. “I’ve already said too much. You will help me capture him.”

“Capture who?”

“The one who goes by the name of DigiCalvin.”

“What do you want with him?”

“That is my business.”

“If you’re asking for my help, then you’re making it my business too.”

AgentJones stared at him for a long time before Max heard Terri’s voice come through his phone. “I found him!”

Chapter 9

Max stared down the barrel of the gun pointed at him. “Terri?” he said aloud.

“Yeah,” she replied.

“Can you disable the gun scripts?”

“Why?”

“Just do it.”

“Okay, hold on. Okay, it’s done.”

Max walked toward AgentJones. He took a step backward. “One step closer and I will shoot you.”

“Go ahead,” Max typed into the chat bar.

AgentJones’ gun made a dull click sound.

“Problem with your gun?” Max asked.

The gun clicked again repeatedly.

“I suggest you log out before I smack you upside the head with the ban hammer.”

AgentJones dropped the gun at his feet. “This isn’t over.”

Max smiled to himself as he typed. “It is for now.”

AgentJones disappeared from the list at the same time his avatar faded from the world.

Max leaned into the phone. “Do you still have DigiCalvin in your sights?”

“Yeah,” Terri replied.

“Where are you?”

“Down by the docks.”

Max ran to the nearest transportation pod on the corner of the street. He entered the round glass-walled structure and clicked the menu button. He clicked again on the link that corresponded with the identical booth located at the docks.

The world shimmered around him and then he was in the other booth.

He exited and scanned all around him. This time, zooming out enabled him to see farther away since the buildings around the docks were no more than a couple stories tall.

He quickly located Terri.

“I see you Terri. Where’s DigiCalvin?”

“He went into the warehouse on the end, closest to the bay.”

Max glanced at the list of players. DigiCalvin was still logged in.

He caught up with Terri. “You go around the back and follow him if he runs out the other side.

“Gotcha,” she replied and her avatar ran off to the left.

Max entered the front door to the warehouse. The massive space inside was stacked from floor to ceiling with crates, leaving a maze of pathways between them. It had been designed specifically for close combat tactical fighting, but it made finding DigiCalvin harder than it should have been for such a small space.

He stood at the doorway and looked at the three possible paths he could choose to look for the avatar hiding inside.

Instead he decided to try to call out to him using the chat bar. “@DigiCalvin. I know you’re in the warehouse. Just talk to me.”

“I have nothing to say to you.”

“Those agent guys seem to really be intent on getting you. What

do they want?"

"I don't know."

"You must have some idea."

After a few moments of silence, DigiCalvin's reply popped up in the chat bar. "One of them wants to kill me and the other wants to help me. The thing is, I don't know which one wants what."

Max was even more confused than before. "Are you seeing this, Terri?" he said out loud.

Her voice came clear over the phone. "Yeah. What is he talking about?"

"I'll ask him."

Max typed into the chat bar. "What are you talking about?"

Terri's voice rose in pitch with excitement. "He's coming out the back!"

Max zoomed out and spotted DigiCalvin running along the edge of the dock with Terri in pursuit. Max jumped into the water and started off after DigiCalvin. He had kept the water level low so that he could easily cross the bay between the three islands that made up Level Arcadia without needing a boat.

He ran along the edge of the docks until he had caught up with Terri. He hopped back onto land and together they continued their pursuit of DigiCalvin.

"Why is he running? Why doesn't he just log out?" Max asked out loud.

"I locked his account. He can't get out until I say so."

Ahead of them, DigiCalvin disappeared into a cybercafé. Max pulled ahead of Terri and headed for the front doors of the café as she angled around to cover the doors on the other side. They didn't want him getting away without one of them spotting him when he

left.

Max rushed through the front door and spotted DigiCalvin sitting at a terminal, typing furiously.

“Hey!” Max typed. “You can’t run from us.”

DigiCalvin looked over at him and then his hand hit the keyboard and he blinked out of existence.

Max frowned at the empty chair where DigiCalvin had been sitting moments before.

Then his eyes twitched to scan the list of players. The only people in Arcadia were he and Terri.

Where did he go?

And how did he get out?

Terri had said she had locked down his connection. He couldn’t leave until she approved the request.

“Terri?” Max asked.

“I saw it,” she replied.

“How did that happen?”

“Working on it,” came her terse reply.

Max sat back and stared at the computer screen. What was going on?

First, two strange players attacked each other, destroying parts of his city in the process. And then the NPC avatars started behaving like real people and DigiCalvin had been able to hack her computer using the virtual terminals she had coded inside the game. How was that even possible?

“Max!” his mother called from downstairs. “Dinner!”

He snatched up the phone. “I have to go Terri.”

“Okay. I have some time before bed to see if I can figure out how this joker got through my firewall.”

“Don’t stress too much. I’ll take the world offline while we figure out how to make everything more secure.”

“And I can fix the AI. Did you notice how they watched us running through the streets, like they were curious as to what we were up to?”

“Yeah. It was very unnerving that they behaved so… human.”

Terri laughed. “I think that’s taking it a little far, but they were certainly a lot more autonomous than I had expected. I will make a copy of the AI before I erase the avatars and see if I can see how it was done with so little code.”

“Max!” his mom hollered again.

“Coming, Mom!” he yelled back. “I really gotta go. See you tomorrow at the mall?”

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world. I have more chores my dad wants me to do. And by me, I mean you,” Terri said and hung up before Max could come up with a snappy retort.

“Maximillion Bennett Gregory!” his mom said as she entered his room. “I’ve been calling you for five minutes to come down to dinner.”

Max pocketed the phone. “Sorry, Mom. I’m coming.”

She held her hand up to stop him. “You know the rules.”

Max dug the phone out of his pocket and set it back on the computer desk. “Right. We eat as a family.”

“If we want to socialize,” she started.

Max joined in and they said the rest together. “We socialize with each other.”

She smiled and placed her arm over his shoulders as they walked out of the room. “Now, if you want to invite someone over dinner?”

“Noah can’t eat over here. His dad says the kitchen isn’t kosher.”

His mom smiled. “I wasn’t talking about Noah.”

“Mom!”

She raised her hands up in surrender. “I’m just putting it out there.”

Max’s heart pounded in his chest. “Terri and I aren’t like that. Besides, she’s a year older than me. I’ll still be in high school when she goes to college. I don’t think she wants that.”

“You don’t know what she wants. I’m just saying, if you want to invite her over for dinner, it’s still just dinner. I’m not asking you to get engaged.”

“Mom!”

“Okay. I just want you to be happy. And by the way, I’m three years older than your father.

Max rolled his eyes as he settled into his chair at the table where his father was already halfway through his steak and keeping one eye on the TV in the living room that was tuned to one of the cable financial channels with the sound muted.

“Who’s older than me?” he asked between forkfuls of mashed potatoes, never taking his eyes off the television screen.

“I was just telling Max that if he wanted to invite Terri over for dinner, it would be fine with us.”

Max’s father’s head snapped to him, his mouth frozen in mid-chew and then looked at his wife. “He likes Terri?”

His mother settled into her chair and re-folded her napkin into her nap. “He could do a lot worse than Terri. They have been close friends since first grade.”

Max's face burned hotly.

His father began chewing again and returned his attention to the stock prices as they scrolled along the bottom of the screen in the modern digital version of ticker tape. "You're embarrassing him, Lily."

Max's face burned even hotter.

She picked up her fork and stared at the back of her husband's head. "It's just us at the table, Ben. I'm letting Max know his options, that's all. He doesn't have anything to be ashamed of."

"Mm," was his only reply as he studied the scrolling stock prices intently, despite not being allowed to trade ever again for the rest of his life. In fact, the ankle monitor kept him from leaving the house except during pre-arranged times.

Max's father had been a major player on the New York Stock Exchange when, two years ago, he had noticed an irregularity in some worldwide trading patterns that totaled a hundred million dollars. He had alerted the proper authorities, but not after computer records revealed that the transfer requests had originated with him.

With all the money returned to the original investors, and the actual thief caught, there was no definitive proof of a connection between him and the computer hacker. So, he was placed under house arrest pending an investigation. With nothing found after nearly two years, he was about to finally get rid of the ankle bracelet and be proclaimed a free man under the condition that he never went near a stock trading computer for the rest of his life.

His father assured them that everything would be okay. As soon as he sued everyone who had blacklisted him, they would have enough money to do anything and go anywhere.

Max watched the dynamic of his parents.

Their family had rode through the rough times and were stronger than ever.

“That’s odd,” his father suddenly said out loud.

“What’s odd, dear,” his mother replied, not looking up from her plate.

He grabbed the remote and unmuted the television. As he raised the volume, the reporter’s voice echoed from the living room. “For the first time in over a decade, the skies above America are empty. The Federal Aviation Administration has been unusually quiet during such an exceptional response to a solar storm and has ignored our repeated requests for a follow-up statement. From what we could gather by our reporters in the field, all scheduled flights have been grounded and the planes currently in the air, and bound for the United States, have been re-directed to other airports around the world. Albert Manetas, our NASA correspondent, informs me that it may take the Earth up to thirty-six hours to pass through a solar cloud like the one described in the FAA notice, so it is possible that regular air traffic may not resume for several days. Stay tuned for updates.”

Max stopped listening to the news reporter drone on. People missing their flights because of solar flares didn’t affect him. Even more intriguing to him than sunspot patterns was the mystery that surrounded DigiCalvin, AgentSmith, and AgentJones.

One way or another, he would get to the bottom of this mystery. What he didn’t know was how deep this mystery actually went.

Chapter 10

In a secret lab built underground in the natural caverns that crisscrossed under the heart of Silicon Valley in California, a twelve-year-old boy sat with one hand on his precision laser gaming mouse and the other hand dipped into a half-eaten bag of Cheetos.

While his chronological age was only twelve, his brain operated as if he had been alive for much longer. Having an IQ over 180 made him hard to talk to, but it also brought him to the attention of the United States Department of Defense when he was only ten. He had wanted a shiny new bike, like the ones all his friends were getting, and his dad had told him they didn't have the money.

After he hacked into multiple international stock trading markets, and used a random stock trader's account to move a hundred million dollars into his father's bank account, he was left with only two choices.

Go to jail or work for the DOD.

After spending two years incarcerated in a secret underground base, he began to wonder if he had made the right decision.

Because real names were discouraged in this top secret base the boy had adopted the nickname of Chester. Mostly because of the orange dust that seemed to constantly be present on the tips of his fingers. And also because he was always blaring music from the Cheetah Girls through his computer speakers.

They had been a popular all-girl pop group before he was even of kindergarten age. He didn't blast their music because he liked it, but because it really annoyed his handler, Emerson, a muscular and overly serious Special Forces soldier tasked with protecting Chester anytime they went topside.

Despite being assigned as Chester's guardian twenty-four hours a day, Emerson's job was relatively easy. The few times during the day when he left Chester alone, he was in the gym to keep in shape should someone try to kidnap Chester on the rare occasions they

went outside the base. Which, unfortunately for Chester, wasn't too often.

But he could tell his fortune was about to change. He knew he would be going outside for the first time in over two months as he watched raw code scroll across the ultra-wide monitor that stretched the full width of his workstation

Despite the monitor showing only a steady stream of letters and numbers, Chester was able to translate the seeming random text into an accurate representation of the final program in his head.

On the wall above his workstation, taped in place with ordinary masking tape, was the original printout from a seventy-two second signal detected from the depths of space on a warm August night in 1977. It was the only known signal ever captured by the numerous activities that comprised humanity's search for extraterrestrial intelligence, known the world over as SETI.

While looking over printed reports of signals detected by the Ohio State University Radio Observatory, volunteer researcher Jerry Ehman circled some unexpected numbers and wrote "Wow!" in the margin.

Those numbers indicated that a signal nearly thirty times stronger than the background noise of deep space had been picked up by the radio telescope nicknamed Big Ear.

The original printout of the Wow! signal, complete with Jerry Ehman's famous one word note, was supposedly in the possession of the Ohio Historical Society. But Chester, despite his tender age, had influence that reached all the way to the highest offices in the United States government.

So, Chester had the original printout taped to his wall while the historical society unknowingly had an excellent reproduction.

The reason he owned such an important piece of history was the same reason he was watching the raw computer code stream across in front of his eyes.

Ever since the detection of the signal, everyone involved had always maintained that there were no recording devices attached to Big Ear on the day the signal was detected. So, while they were able to capture the intensity of the signal, unfortunately there were no recordings of what was overheard.

Chester was one of a handful of people who knew that the insistence that there were no recordings of the signal was not only inaccurate, but a bold-faced lie.

Chester had heard the recording himself on that warm August night.

He was the last person they called, because he was the first person to successfully get a response from the alien mind. The alien mind that lived inside the computer program that was beamed out into deep space and recorded by Big Ear nearly thirty years before Chester had been born.

Chester's hand rested on the cheese puffs inside the cellophane snack bag as his mind rebuilt the conversation between the alien, going by the name DigiCalvin in an online multiplayer game, and the user who had created that game, who went by the name ToTheMax.

Of high interest to Chester was the new players that had shown up recently and went by the names AgentSmith and AgentJones.

Somehow, they knew who DigiCalvin was; the heir to an alien throne whose real name was Thomas.

Since Chester was the only person who had made full contact with Thomas, it was highly unlikely that anyone else on Earth knew what he knew about Thomas. He had promised to keep Thomas's secrets. But now, there were two more people who knew who Thomas was. And they were tracking him down, getting closer every day to capturing him.

Chester couldn't let that happen.

He wouldn't let that happen.

Out of everyone on the planet, he was the only one who had the tools and technology to keep Thomas safe.

It was a big responsibility for a twelve-year-old to have on his shoulders, but he had been preparing for this his whole life. Well, it felt like it had been his whole life. It was really more like the last two years.

While other kids his age were caught up in the daily life of the typical teenager, Chester had been working in isolation to perfect his virtual reality system. A system that had enabled him to be the first, and only person until this Maximillion kid came along, to hold a conversation with Thomas.

He had two complete systems ready for endurance testing, and thanks to the information revealed through the code that sped past his monitor, he knew exactly who should pilot his updated system.

Chester picked up the phone sitting on his desk and pressed a single number.

He waited until the line stopped ringing and then spoke without waiting for the person on the other side to say anything. “I’m ready to schedule a play date,” he said and then promptly hung up before Emerson could try to talk him out of it.

Chapter 11

Max laid in bed and stared up at the dark ceiling. He couldn't keep from thinking about what DigiCalvin had said. How was he different from Max? And what had he meant by that?

With his mind still racing through numerous unanswerable questions, he was awake when headlights streamed through the window and illuminated the glow-in-the-dark stars glued to his ceiling. It sounded like someone had stopped right in front of his house. He moved to the window and saw two dark SUVs parked in front of his house, one of them blocking the driveway. Three men in black combat uniforms walked up the front sidewalk and disappeared under the front porch overhang right before the doorbell rang.

He glanced at the clock by the bed. It was just after two in the morning. What were soldiers doing at his house in the middle of the night? What had his dad done this time?

Suddenly, the rear door on the lead vehicle opened, Terri jumped out, and started running toward the house.

"Max!" she screamed as she ran. "Run!"

Two men in the same black combat uniforms jumped from the rear vehicle and rushed after her, tackling her to the ground.

"Let me go!" she shrieked as they carried her back to the SUV and loaded her into the back.

Max heard the front door open and muted voices spoke sharply with his father. Half a second later, boots pounded up the stairwell despite his father's voiced objections.

By the time the men in uniforms opened the door to Max's room, he was gone.

Chapter 12

Max dropped the last two feet off the lattice trellis built alongside the house. Along with protecting the exterior wall siding from the destructiveness of ivy as it grew, it also served as a ladder to Max's room. He landed in the wet dirt with a soft thud and crouched low behind the bushes that lined this side of the house. He looked up in response to a noise above him and met the eyes of one of the soldiers.

"He went out the window!" the soldier yelled as he disappeared back inside.

Max hopped up and grabbed his bike that leaned against the trellis. He rode straight across the yard as several men rushed around the side of the house.

"Halt!" A deep voice yelled after him.

Max wasn't about to do that.

He rode between the closely planted rose bushes along the sidewalk's edge of his yard, thorns grabbing at his grey sweatpants. He ignored the sharp pain and jumped off the curb and into the street, pumping hard with his legs to get up to full speed.

He tilted his bike around the first corner to maintain his speed through the turn and was halfway down the block when he heard the screeching of tires behind him.

He glanced back to see a dark SUV skidding around the corner after him. He pumped his legs faster, his BMX bike wobbling back and forth as he stood on the pedals.

He glanced back in response to the revving engine. The SUV was getting closer.

He turned up a driveway and raced through the gate into the back yard of a neighbor's house. He had worked in most of the yards of the houses around him for summer money, so he knew

exactly where he was going.

He heard the SUV skid to a halt in front of the house and shouting men barked orders at each other, hoping to trap Max.

He had other plans.

He skidded to a stop next to the back fence and tossed his bike over. It landed safely in a large leaf pile on the other side he knew was there. Max made extra money after school raking the leaves that abandoned the branches all at once in the fall.

He clambered over the fence and was straddling the top when one of the black-clad soldiers came around the corner of the house and spotted him.

To Max's surprise, he immediately pulled a gun from the holster on the side of his leg. He lowered his stance and brought the weapon to bear on Max just as he dropped over the fence into the pile of leaves next to his bike.

The fence twanged as something ricocheted off it.

They were shooting at him!

What had he done?!

He certainly wasn't going to stop to ask. He pulled his bike from the pile of leaves and hopped on it quickly as he raced through the back yard toward the front of the house.

Slowly, he peeked around the corner of the house, checking in both directions. His paintball skills were really being put to the test.

The street was empty.

He heard the noise of something large falling into the pile of leaves behind him. Whoever had shot at him was still in pursuit.

Max had to get away. He didn't know what they wanted, but he wasn't going to just sit around and let them get him without a fight.

He pulled his bike out and raced down the driveway, his bike wobbling back and forth wildly as he pumped faster.

“Freeze!” a voice behind him demanded.

Max didn’t do as he was ordered and pedaled faster instead.

As he rode past a tree, something impacted with it, igniting in a small burst of flame.

He angled around the next corner, glancing behind him only to see his pursuer losing ground as he chased him down the street on foot.

Max smiled to himself as he turned the next corner and lost the soldier, his screams of anger fading in the distance.

Max kept making random turns with no clear destination in mind. If he didn’t know where he was going, it stood to reason that whoever was chasing him would never be able to figure it out either.

He pedaled as hard as he could, his breath coming in ragged gasps as the adrenaline was dissipating. He was suddenly feeling very tired, and he was only dressed in sweat pants and a T-shirt. He was dressed for sleeping in a warm bed in a heated house. He was not dressed for being exposed to the cold night. The only reason he hadn’t felt the cold before now was that he was riding as hard as he could, and that kept him very warm.

But now that he had been riding around the neighborhood for a full half hour, he was slowing down and burning less energy. He was also cooling down, and starting to feel the chill of the night air.

He racked his brain for somewhere to go and then he realized there was one place where he was always welcome, any time of day or night.

Chapter 13

Max abandoned his bike several houses away and hopped the fences through backyards to make his way to Noah's house. Noah was his best friend, and he had spent the night at his house several times. Noah's parents had told him that if he had ever needed anything, he could come over at any time.

It was time to see if they really meant it.

Max jumped down over the last fence and made his way toward the gate. It was still the middle of the night, and the soft sounds of the night carried to him. A dog barked somewhere in the distance like he had to fulfill a late night neighborhood noise requirement.

Max opened the gate quietly and slipped through it. He held the latch as he closed the gate to keep it from clanking noisily as it locked shut again. He ducked low and crawled to the edge of the house, peeking around it.

Across the street, Noah's house sat dark and silent.

Max held his breath and listened.

He heard nothing that indicated the men in the SUVs were anywhere nearby. He had evaded them and was about to get to safety.

Noah's father was an attorney and this was America. Once Max was with an attorney, the military soldiers couldn't do anything to him.

Max stood up and headed down the driveway. As soon as he reached the sidewalk, he was immediately flooded with bright light from the sky.

Max shielded his eyes against the light and only then noticed the wind had picked up from the rotor wash of the black helicopter that hovered silently above the street.

“Put your hands up!” a voice commanded through a loudspeaker on the helicopter.

Max froze in place and shot his hands in the air. There was nowhere he could go to get away from a helicopter, and he knew it.

Ropes dropped down from the open doors of the helicopter and men with rifles rappelled down the ropes. They hit the ground, quickly surrounded him, and pointed their rifles at him.

An SUV screeched around the corner and skidded to a stop in the middle of the street.

The door opened and the same soldier who had shot at him stepped out. The soldier was staring hard at him as he walked up to Max and poked a finger into his face. “You’re quick. I’ll give you that. But don’t you ever run from me like that again or else.”

Max didn’t know if it was the resurgence of adrenaline coursing through his veins or the fact that he didn’t have anything to lose that bolstered his courage. “Or else what?”

“Stand down soldier!” a voice commanded from behind him.

The soldier who had threatened Max turned around and stiffened to attention and saluted the smaller man who walked over from the second SUV that had arrived unnoticed. “Major General, sir!”

The major general didn’t bother to salute the soldier back. “You are dismissed.”

“Yes, sir.”

The soldier walked briskly to the other SUV and stood at attention next to it and never once took his steely gaze off of Max.

The major general stood in front of Max and silently motioned for everyone to lower their rifles. They did so and all moved back. “My name is Major General Braxton and you can put your hands down now, son.”

Max lowered his hands. “Am I in some kind of trouble?”

He laughed. “Of course not, my boy. We’re actually here to ask for your help.”

Chapter 14

Max swallowed dryly. “Ask for my help? A second ago your goons were shooting at me!”

Major General Braxton smiled warmly. “I do, of course, use the word ‘ask’ loosely. I am extending you this courtesy only because I would like you to come willingly rather than force you.”

“What do you want with me?”

“I’m afraid that’s classified.”

“So, it’s on a need to know basis?”

Braxton laughed again. “Oh, you need to know, and you will; in time. But for now, I just need you to come with me.”

Max looked around at the armed soldiers that stood ready should he try to make a run for it again. He also looked at the people drawn from their homes by the unexpected military activity in the street in front of their houses in the middle of the night.

Noah stood in the open doorway of his house, the lights now all fully on. He was in-between his parents and mouth, “What did you do?” to Max.

Max shrugged his shoulders and looked back at Braxton.

“Where are we going?”

“That’s even more classified than why I’ve been ordered to collect you.”

Max frowned. “Who ordered you to collect me?”

“That I can tell you. It came all the way from the top.”

“You mean, the president?”

Braxton nodded. “He’s the only one who has the authority to get

me out of bed and make me fly halfway across the country. So, Max, are you coming with me peacefully?"

Max looked back at Noah. His dad was only a corporate attorney. There was nothing he could do against the orders of the President of the United States.

Max looked back at Braxton. "Yes."

Chapter 15

Max was loaded into the back of the second SUV and sat down next to Terri. Her hands were cuffed in front of her and a gag tied around her mouth.

“Mmmmm”, she mumbled through the gag. The soldier in the front passenger seat spun around and pointed a finger at her. “Are you going to behave?”

She nodded. He regarded her for a long moment, his face remaining emotionless, before he reached forward and pulled down her gag. “Remember, you promised. The next time it will be in a full hood and leg irons.”

“Jerk!” she said.

He ignored her and faced forward as the SUV pulled away from the curb.

She stuck her tongue out at the back of his head and then turned to Max. “Sorry, I couldn’t give you more warning.”

Max smiled. “That’s okay. Why did they arrest us?”

Before she could answer, the passenger in the front seat piped in. “Neither of you are under arrest.”

Terri held up her handcuffed hands. “Then what do you call these?”

“They are for your own protection,” he replied without turning around.

She laughed and dropped her hands into her lap. “More like to protect you from me. I’m fine.”

Max struggled to keep his mouth closed. Terri was being so rebellious, and with government soldiers no less. “Terri, I think you better calm down.”

She turned on him. “Calm down? Calm down!? You’re telling me to calm down! We were taken from our beds in the middle of the night by the guys who are famous… guys who are infamous for making people disappear in the middle of the night. I’m willing to bet you ten to one odds, if anyone asked our parents tomorrow morning what happened to us, they would deny ever having had children.”

“That’s not true,” Max said and leaned forward to look at the one who had removed Terri’s gag. “That’s not true, is it?”

The passenger glanced back at him, smirked, and then faced forward.

Terri raised her hands. It looked awkward with the handcuffs restraining her movements and keeping her hands close together. “I hope you don’t have any regrets, Max. We’ve just been disappeared.”

Chapter 16

Max sat in silence while Terri leaned over and whispered. “If you get the opportunity to escape, take it and don’t look back.”

Max gave her a shocked look. “I’m not going anywhere without you.”

“The first one of us who gets the chance to break free, we take it. We can send someone to rescue the other. The important thing is that one of us gets out of here to blow the lid on this whole operation.”

“What operation? We don’t even know why they took us.”

“Precisely. And we’re never going to find out. My guess, they’ll wipe our memories and use us as spies or something. We’ll probably be reprogrammed to know judo and be able to speak ten languages fluently.”

The passenger up front angled his head and gave us a sideways glance. “Your little friend here watches way too much television.”

She shot him a vile look. “None of this is on television. You guys would never let this information get out, even posing as fiction.”

“Because that’s exactly what you are talking about. Fiction.”

“Oh yeah? How would you know?”

He turned fully around and Terri moved so quickly, she was a blur.

She kicked him in the face with both feet. His nose erupted in crimson and he fell back against the seatbelt unconscious. Following along with the same fluid motion without hesitation, she kicked the driver in the head three times in rapid succession. He yelped in pain and the SUV swerved wildly, jumped the curb, and slammed into a tree.

In an explosive instant, the airbags deployed and Max slid off the

seat and landed in a crumpled heap on the floor with Terri disappearing over the front seat. She stood quickly and searched the moaning driver's pockets until she produced the handcuff keys.

Max picked himself up off the floor and looked at the two highly skilled men that Terri had single-handedly taken out. "Where did you learn to do that?"

"I've been in Karate since I was five. I still go every day after school."

"I guess I knew that."

Terri managed to angle the key awkwardly in place, unlocked her cuffs, and tossed them onto the back seat. "My sensei says I have aggression issues."

"Duh," Max said.

She smiled.

Max laughed nervously. "What's happening? Why are they after us?"

Headlights suddenly illuminated the interior as the other SUV skidded to a halt on the street. Angry voices began shouting commands for them to come out with their hands up.

Terri nodded in the direction of the other SUV. "That's what I intend to find out."

Chapter 17

Max kept his hands high in the air as he exited the SUV next to Terri. He took the opportunity to survey the damage that Terri had caused. The entire front end of the SUV was embedded in a tree and steam rose from the crumpled engine.

Armed soldiers surrounded them, yet kept their distance.

Braxton stepped between two soldiers and stared at them.

“What happened here?” he demanded.

Terri took a step forward and soldiers adjusted their rifles, pointing them at her.

“Before we go another inch, Max and I want to know what’s going on.”

“I told you…” Braxton started before she interrupted him.

“I know what you told me. What you didn’t tell me is what you want with us.”

He stared at her for a long moment before responding. “That’s classified.”

“I don’t know if you are aware or not, but teenagers can keep secrets. We’re not all blabbermouths. I can keep a secret. So can my friend here. Right, Max?”

Max nodded silently in agreement despite wishing she would have just gone along with them and not tried to buck the system.

She looked back at Braxton. “See? All of this could have been avoided if you had just trusted us.”

“But I don’t know if I can trust you, yet.”

“Then you better start, or we will be standing here a very long time.”

“You underestimate the power I wield. I can force you to go with me.”

Terri narrowed her eyes at him. “I would advise against it.”

Braxton placed his hands behind him and rocked back on his heels. “So what do you want to know?”

“Why did you come for us?”

“I need your help to prevent an international crisis.”

“What kind of crisis?”

“I’m afraid that the rest of my men are not cleared to know that.”

“Then whisper it in my ear.”

He looked around and then nodded his head. The guns all lowered at the same time to his non-verbal command. He stood next to her, leaned in, and spoke softly into her ear for nearly a minute.

Max watched the expression on Terri’s face shift from defiance, to confusion, and finally to concern. When he finished his monologue, he leaned back and looked at Terri.

She lowered her arms. “Is that true?”

He nodded. “Every word.”

“What if we can’t do anything about that?’

“Then we shift to Plan B.”

“What’s Plan B?”

Braxton chuckled. “You might find this hard to believe, but even I have not been cleared to know that yet. Suffice it to say, none of us will like Plan B. It’s never better than the first plan.”

Chapter 18

Nobody was more confused at Terri's sudden change of heart than Max.

Braxton headed for his SUV and Terri fell along beside him. She spun around as she walked, an energetic spring in her step. "Come on, Max. We can't do this without you."

Max slowly lowered his hands as he took a step forward. When the soldiers didn't react, he walked more quickly and caught up to them at the other SUV.

Braxton held the door until they were both in the back seats and then closed it. As he walked around the front, his uniform reflecting the bright halogen headlights. He settled into the front passenger seat and then twisted slightly to look at Max.

"I trust you can wait until we arrive at our destination to find out why you are needed?"

Max nodded, but still wanted to know one thing. "Where are we going?"

Braxton twisted forward and the driver started up the SUV as he replied.

"California."

Chapter 19

Max sat in silence as he watched Terri stare out the window of the SUV. They drove for over an hour until they reached the front gates of a military base. Braxton saluted the gate keeper and they continued without delay to the airstrip.

Braxton stepped out and opened Max's door. "You need to be suited up and on your way in ten minutes."

Max stepped out and looked around at the wide open space. He didn't see any planes waiting for them on the runway. "When will the plane be here?"

"Your planes are already fueled and ready to go."

Max looked again at the empty runway. "Planes? We need more than one?"

"We need to get you both to California in an hour, so you will each be in your own Mach 3 capable plane."

Mach 3? They were going in fighter jets? Max scanned the open area again, seeing nothing. "Where are they?"

Braxton pointed onto a random spot on the runway. "Right there."

Max squinted into the night and, for a brief moment, he thought he made out the shape of something hiding in the darkness.

Why couldn't he see them? It was like they were cloaked.

No, not cloaked. They were painted black.

But they couldn't be; could they?

Braxton had said Mach 3, and there was only one plane Max knew about that was painted black, actually a really dark blue, and could fly faster than Mach 3. But they had all been retired before the turn of the millennium.

Once he knew what he was looking for, the dark shape against the night sky resolved itself into exactly what he expected to see.

He was staring at the side profiles of not one, but two, SR-71 Blackbirds sitting at the end of the runway waiting for them.

He gave Braxton a startled look.

“I’m going to be riding in an SR-71 Blackbird?”

Braxton didn’t crack a smile and stared matter-of-factly, as if something like this happened every day, “NASA is heavily involved in this project. Once we knew the two of you were needed in California ASAP, they sent them.”

Max couldn’t believe his luck. He had a poster of this very same plane on his wall. And now he was going to be flying in one.

He turned to Terri and pointed at the dark silhouettes. “SR-71 Blackbird! We’re… going… to fly… in an SR-71 Blackbird,” he stammered.

She shrugged. “What’s the big deal?”

An electric cart screeched to a halt in front of them. A man jumped from the cart and saluted Braxton. “Private Walker Bartley reporting, sir.”

Then he looked at Max and Terri and shot a confused look at Braxton. “Are these the packages?”

Braxton nodded. “They need to leave in ten minutes.”

Bartley looked at Max. “They’re just kids.”

Terri took a step forward. “What’s that supposed to mean?” she demanded.

Bartley took a step back and held his hands up. “Nothing. It’s just that all the flight suits are designed for adults. I don’t know if I have anything that will fit.”

Braxton opened the door to his SUV. “Figure it out, private.”

Bartley snapped to attention and saluted. “Yes, sir.”

Braxton took one last look at Terri. “You two are our last hope. If you don’t succeed, there will be no one left to wish we had done things differently.”

Terri stood straighter. “We won’t let you down, sir.”

Braxton stared at her, and then at Max, before shaking his head and climbing into the SUV.

After the SUV pulled away quickly, Max turned on Terri. “What did he mean that there won’t be anyone left?”

Terri waved him off. “Don’t worry about it.”

Before Max could pressure her for more information, Bartley interrupted. “I have to get you two suited up for the flight.”

Terri turned to him. “Lead the way.”

Bartley headed for the small hanger to their left. Terri followed him quickly, Max jogging to catch up with her. “What was he talking about?”

Terri kept looking forward without responding.

Max touched her arm, causing her head to snap in his direction.

“What did he tell you when he whispered in your ear?” Max asked.

Terri returned her focus back to the front and kept walking briskly behind Bartley who led them into a brightly lit hanger. “Not much. But what he did say scared the you-know-what out of me.”

“What did he say?”

“They’ll tell us everything when we get to California.”

“Tell me now.”

“I can’t.”

“Yes, you can.”

She shook her head, but didn’t look at him. “I’ll get it wrong. Just wait until we reach California.”

Bartley stopped in front of a woman who was dressed in the same green uniform he was. He spun around and pointed at Terri. “You’ll go with Private Larson. You, boy…”

“Max,” Max said.

“Right. Max. You’re with me.”

Bartley spun around and went through a door while the woman went through another door.

Terri looked at Max. “See you in California,” she said as she followed the woman through the door, letting it close after her.

Chapter 20

Max followed Bartley through the door and found himself in a locker room. One wall was lined with open lockers with a metallic bench running the length of the room along the opposite wall.

Bartley was holding two suits up in front of him. “These are the smallest I have.” He held one out to Max. “Let’s try this one first.”

Max took it and laid it down on the bench. He grabbed the waistband on his sweatpants and then stopped, looking at Bartley.

Bartley suddenly realized he had been facing Max. “Sorry. There’s very little privacy in the Air Force and I forget that civilians still feel self-conscious.”

He spun on his heels and faced away from Max. “Is that better?”

“Thanks,” Max replied and stripped down to his boxers before pulling on the flight suit. After nearly a minute, he was still struggling with how to put the suit on when Bartley spoke. “Need help?”

Max stood in his underwear with only one leg in the suit. “Yeah. I could use some help.”

Bartley turned around. “Sit down.”

“What?”

“It’s easier to start while you are sitting down. Have a seat on the bench and we’ll have you in this in no time.”

Max complied and did his best to help as Bartley tugged, pulled, and slipped the suit on Max’s legs, and then helped him slide his arms in.

“Stand up,” Bartley said.

Max stood and Bartley tugged at various spots around the suit while spinning Max slowly around. “That’s what I was afraid of.”

“What?” Max asked nervously.

“You’re too small for the suit.” I’m gonna need to do something. Wait here.”

He ran out of the room and returned a moment later with a full-body wetsuit. He held it up and showed it to Max. “I use this when I go surfing. This should add some bulk to your body and bridge the gap enough so the suit will work. Let’s get you back out and put this on first.”

Bartley worked on helping Max into the wetsuit and back into the flight suit. Once he was done, Max stood with his arms raised while Bartley tugged at various points on the suit. He took a step back and looked Max up and down. “I guess that will have to do.”

There was a knock on the door and it opened without waiting for Max or Bartley to respond. Another soldier poked his head into the room. “Wheels up in five.”

“We’re ready,” Bartley replied and then looked at Max. “Right, Max?”

Max nodded and the soldier swung the door open wide. “If you will follow me, then.”

Max followed Bartley and the soldier across the darkened runway. The soldier stopped at the side of the SR-71 and snapped to attention. Max could see Terri already settling in to the back seat of the other SR-71 with her own soldier keeping guard at the base of the ladder.

Bartley indicated his ladder. “Up you go.”

Max gripped the rungs in both hands and placed a foot on the bottom rung. He couldn’t believe he was about to ride in such a legendary stealth plane. He should have been thrilled. But his heart wasn’t racing from excitement. It was racing from fear. He still didn’t know what secret Terri had been told that made her cooperate so quickly. Nor did he understand what Braxton meant when he said they were his last hope.

He climbed the ladder and settled into the back seat of the Blackbird. Bartley followed him up the ladder and handed him a helmet with a mirrored faceplate. “Put this on while I get you hooked up to the environmental systems.”

Max snapped the helmet onto his head and Bartley sealed the neck clamp and attached hoses and wires to his suit that snaked out from the side of the cockpit.

Bartley patted his helmet and his voice came muffled through the airtight seal. “You okay in there?”

Max nodded.

Bartley waved his hand over all the switches and controls that filled the front of the cockpit. “Don’t touch any of this, understand?”

Max nodded again.

Bartley patted his helmet again and smiled at him. “Good. Just sit back and enjoy the ride. And remember, during its entire service life, no SR-71 was ever shot down.”

Bartley disappeared over the edge of the cockpit. Why did he mention that? They were just going to California. Who would be trying to shoot down an American plane over American airspace?

Max decided he was just trying to scare him.

Yeah. That was it. Why else would he bring up being shot down for Max’s first flight in the world’s most famous stealth plane?

The pilot’s voice echoed in his head. “You all settled back there?”

“Yes, sir,” Max replied.

“We can dispense with the formalities while on my plane. My name’s Casper.”

Max’s eyebrows knitted as an image formed in his head. “As in ‘the friendly ghost’?”

“Exactly,” the pilot responded. “When I’m in the air, I’m a ghost. Don’t worry. I will get you to California safe and sound. Nothing’s going to happen as long as I’m in control. I can dodge just about anything. Heck, merely accelerating is more than enough to evade most surface-to-air missiles. And that’s if they could even get a lock on us. We will be traveling at three times the speed of sound with all counter-measures activated. We will barely be seen, let alone be able to be targeted.”

Now the pilot was talking as if he expected to be shot at while they flew from one coast to the other. He suddenly remembered hearing the television reporter describing the solar super storm that had grounded all flights. He knew from reading about the SR-71 that it flew higher than most. If the solar activity was strong enough to interfere with air traffic systems on the ground, it most certainly could do something to the plane when they were at the edge of the atmosphere.

“Excuse me?” Max said into his helmet.

“Yes?” the pilot replied.

“What about the solar storm? Won’t it affect the plane?”

“What solar storm?” the pilot asked.

“It was on the news earlier. It’s why all the planes have been grounded or sent away.”

There was a short pause before the pilot responded. “Is that the story they went with? Trust me. There’s no solar storm.”

“But the news…”

“Don’t worry about what you heard on the news, kiddo. The only thing that matters is that I get you to California in one piece.”

“One piece?!” Max exclaimed. “Why would you not get me there in one piece?”

“Just sit back and relax, kid. I got this,” the pilot said as he switched on the engines and the plane started vibrating.

Max's heart started racing again. He looked out the side of the window in response to a loud road. He could see the flames jetting out the back of the other SR-71's engines as Terri's plane shot down the runway and out of sight before it took off.

Max closed his eyes as his SR-71 spun around slowly and lined up with the runway.

"Please don't let me die in the most awesome plane in the world," he whispered to himself as the g-forces exerted by the sudden thrust from the massive jet engines smashed him flat into his seat.

Chapter 21

Max's stomach flipped upside down as they lifted into the air and the world started to spin all around him wildly. No. It wasn't the world that was spinning. It was him. For some reason, the pilot pointed the SR-71 straight up and barrel rolled tightly as they climbed.

After a few minutes, the pilots stopped rolling the plane and leveled out.

The pilot's voice echoed to him through the speakers built into his helmet. "You still with me?"

"What was that about?" Max said as he looked around the rear cockpit for a barf bag.

"Most radar tracking software can recognize the difference between a plane lifting off and a rocket launch. We were ordered to mask our take-off as a rocket launch. Sorry, I should have warned you."

"You think?" Max spat out as he kept his stomach in check and fought the urge to vomit. "Why did we need to look like a rocket launch?"

"I just work here. I'm told where to go, who to pick up and where to take them. Whoever you are, you must be important enough to spend $160,000 per hour to keep this plane in the air."

"These planes cost $160,000 an hour?"

"Each," the pilot replied matter-of-factly. "You and your friend must be very important."

It seemed that everyone was in on the secret but Max. Was he the last one in the world to know what was going on?

But what was the mission?

Get two teenagers from Virginia to California in an hour? That

seemed like overkill in an era when they could have used Skype to instantly communicate with anyone in the world.

Why did they need to bring them physically anywhere?

Whatever that answer was, Max wasn't so sure he was going to like it.

Chapter 22

Max felt he had spent the better part of the night pressed against the seat in the rear cockpit. They had to be halfway to California by now.

All he could see out the window was the bright pinpoints of stars. He was at the ceiling of the world with nothing between him and the reaches of space but his pressurized flight suit and the tempered glass of the cockpit canopy.

After a while, he moved his gaze to the numerous switches, dials, and readouts that filled the panel in front of him. How could anyone know what was going on with so many things moving and flashing at once?

He had effectively been told “hands off” and he was going to follow those orders. He had not been tempted to touch any of the switches or dials. Not once.

At least not until a red light started flashing and an irritating beeping started up in his helmet. His first instinct was to find which switch controlled that annoying and pulsating tone and turn it off.

“What’s that beeping sound?” he asked.

The pilot didn’t respond, but instead flipped the plane on its side and pulled into a sideways climb.

Max felt the skin on his face stretch back as the Blackbird accelerated and made a wide turn.

“What’s going on?” he asked, his voice straining under the g-forces. The pilot responded by flipping the plane on its other side and pulling into another sideways climb.

“What are you doing?!” Max screamed as his stomach threatened to let loose what was left of his dinner.

“Please stay quiet,” the pilot responded and then sent the plane

into a quick barrel roll. As the world swooped overhead, Max noticed something shoot past them, leaving behind a thin white smoke trail.

The plane stopped rolling, the curve of the planet spanning out above him. Only, the world wasn't above him, Max was flying upside down.

Suddenly, the entire world shifted to fill his view as they dropped straight down toward the surface of the Earth.

Chapter 23

More red lights flashed and more insistent beeping sounds filled his ears as the plane panicked at the sudden tailspin the pilot had thrown them into.

Max really wanted to throw up, but the pressure on his body kept his muscles from pushing his dinner up and out of his stomach.

The pilot pulled out of the dive and it felt like all of Max's skin had been pulled to one side of his body. The plane jerked again, shifting all of his skin to the other side of his body.

Something streaked past the windows, the plane fragmented the smoke trail as it passed through it at high speed.

"Hold on!" the pilot said.

"Hold on to what?" Max said right before something flared bright outside the glass canopy.

The plane shuddered violently under his seat and the plane spun out of control as it skipped across the atmosphere.

Max didn't know how it was different, but it no longer felt like the pilot was in control.

"Hello?" Max yelled into his helmet. "Are you okay?"

The plane rocked back and forth as it bounced around the thin air. Max saw flames flare up and curl over the leading edges of the plane.

They were on fire!

Or burning up in the atmosphere!

Either way, it wasn't good.

And there was only one person who could save them.

“Hey!” Max yelled again. “Wake up!”

The pilot responded with a faint moan.

He was still alive!

“Wake up!” Max hollered. “We’re on fire!”

He heard the pilot snort loudly and let out a pained grunt as the plane shuddered again and spun violently in a new direction before settling into a smoother rolling trajectory through the sky.

The pilot was alive, awake, and back in control. Max’s heart felt like it was going to explode like the missile that had tried to destroy his plane. Who had shot at them? And why?

Max suddenly thought of Terri.

Had someone shot at her plane too?

Had her pilot been able to save her?

He glanced out the window and tried to focus on the moving horizon, looking for any sign of the other SR-71. He couldn’t see anything, but then again, why would he? It was small and dark against the night sky. It was designed to blend in and become practically invisible against the blackness of space.

What he was really looking for was the indication that it had exploded and fell to Earth; leaving behind a trail of fire and smoke.

He scanned the skies all around, seeing nothing. But that didn’t mean she hadn’t been shot down like they almost had.

“Hey, Casper?” he started before being interrupted.

“Not now,” he replied in a pained and unsteady voice.

Max sat back as the plane finally righted itself and Casper regained full control.

Max suddenly felt weightless and rose in his seat as the plane

dropped through the atmosphere. If he wasn't going to throw up before, this was definitely going to do it.

He gulped repeatedly to calm his stomach as they fell from the sky.

Gravity returned and he settled back into his seat. They burst through a layer of clouds and flew for a few more minutes before the pilot banked in a wide turn. As the plane tilted, Max could see the lights of civilization below.

The plane leveled out again and Max was stuck looking at the low clouds as they settled on the runway, bouncing roughly only once before the wheels stayed on the pavement.

The plane taxied to a stop and Max could barely hear all the muted commotion that happened at the front of the plane. His canopy was suddenly covered in a fine white powder before the commotion finally died down and it became silent again.

How long were they going to leave him sitting in here? He looked at the cables and hoses that connected him to the plane. He had no idea how to unhook them. He also didn't want to damage anything, so he just sat there and waited, hoping his stomach calmed down from the g-forces so he didn't throw up inside a multi-million dollar plane.

After a few minutes his stomach finally settled down just as the canopy popped open with a hiss of air and a face peered over the edge down at him. "Welcome to California."

Chapter 24

The technician unhooked the cables and tubes connected to Max's suit. He leaned back as Max stood up. Max grabbed at the edge of the cockpit as a new wave of dizziness overcame him.

The technician reached forward and grabbed Max's arm, steadying him. "Easy there. You've had quite an adventure."

He helped Max out of the cockpit and onto a portable staircase that had been wheeled to the side of the plane. He held Max's arm as they made their way down the steps. Once on the ground, Max looked at the front of the SR-71 Blackbird and his heart stopped.

One side of the front of the plane was torn away, shards of titanium were peeled back and the canopy was completely shattered. The cockpit was exposed to the open air and a fine white dust covered everything, from the fire extinguishers they used to put out the fire.

The technician noticed Max staring at the damaged plane. "You're lucky Casper was your pilot. Anybody else, and you would have been a smoldering ember lying in a crater somewhere in Nevada."

"What happened?"

"Casper did his best to avoid the surface-to-air missiles, but one detonated too close and tore up the side of the Blackbird. Most guys would have ditched, but not Casper. He can fly anything that isn't a brick."

Max looked around again. "Where is he?"

"They took him to the infirmary. He wasn't looking too well, but if I know Casper, he'll be up and at 'em in a few days."

A horrifying thought occurred to Max. If Casper was the best and he had been Max's pilot and had barely survived, what about Terri?

Max frantically looked around the runway, but couldn't see the other SR-71. She had left before he did and should have arrived first.

She wasn't here.

Max's knees buckled under him and the technician reacted quickly, gripping his arm tightly in both hands. "Whoa. You okay?"

He looked at the technician, his eyes tearing up. "Terri…" he managed to choke out.

The technician's forehead wrinkled. "Who?"

"Max?" a familiar voice called from behind him.

Max turned around and saw Terri running up to him. He pulled away from the technician's grip and grabbed Terri in a bear hug, lifting her off the ground.

Terri returned his hug and then released, but Max wasn't going to let her go. Never again.

"Um, Max?" she said quietly. "You can let me down now."

Max released her and thought the smile on his face was going to split his head in half.

She frowned at him. "Are you okay?"

"I am now. After what happened to us, I didn't know if…" He couldn't bring himself to finish his sentence out loud. He even regretted thinking it.

She looked even more confused. "What happened?"

He turned her around and pointed at what was left of the front of his SR-71. Her mouth fell open and she looked at him, the shock frozen on her face. "What did that?"

"A missile. Someone tried to shoot us down."

“Shoot you down? They promised that nobody could target the stealth planes?”

“You knew someone might shoot at us?”

“Kind of.”

“And you didn’t tell me?”

“The general told me to stay quiet until we were here.”

“And just where is here?”

A high-pitched voice broke into their conversation. “I can answer that.”

Max and Terri turned around and looked up, expecting to meet yet another adult about to tell them what to do. Instead, they were forced to look down at a young pudgy boy who stood in front of them.

The boy smiled at them and held out an open snack bag to them.

“Cheetos?”

“No, thank you,” replied Max.

He angled the bag toward Terri. She shook her head and he dove in for another handful, thought better of it, and folded the top of the bag over. “My name is Chester. I asked for you to be brought to Silicon Valley.”

“Why here?” Max asked.

“It’s where I work. Why else would I bring you here? Don’t ask stupid questions.”

Max’s face flared red. “All I have are questions, Stupid or not, I need answers.”

Terri placed her hand on Max’s arm, calming him down as she turned to Chester. “Max doesn’t know anything…”

“Hey,” Max blurted out.

Terri shot him a sideways glance. “I was about to say, Max doesn’t know anything about what’s going on. I know a little. And what little I do know scares me.”

Chester nodded. “As well it should. The fate of our whole world rests on your shoulders. And frankly, I’m not really sure if either of you are up to the challenge.”

Chapter 25

Max scrutinized the kid standing in front of him. The kid looked no more than nine or ten years old, and he was a little more than slightly overweight. No doubt the bag of snacks in his hand had something to do with that.

Max pointed at his damaged SR-71. “I don’t know if you are aware, but my plane was almost shot down over Nevada. Is there maybe somebody around who can tell me what is going on?”

Chester turned around and started walking away. “I can tell you everything you want to know.”

Max and Terri looked at each other.

Max pointed after Chester. “Do we follow him?”

Terri shrugged her shoulders. “I guess so.”

“Do you really think he’s the one in charge around here?”

“I’ve seen crazier things,” she replied as they caught up with Chester just as he was climbing into the driver’s seat of an electric golf cart.

“Shotgun!” Terri said a moment before Max.

“Fine,” Max said and climbed into the back seat while Terri took the front passenger seat. They hadn’t fully settled into the cart when Chester accelerated across the tarmac.

Max clung to the hand rail as Chester careened back and forth needlessly. There was nothing but empty pavement for hundreds of feet in every direction, and he was driving as if he was on an obstacle course.

“What’s the big hurry,” Max said.

“We have less than thirty hours to meet the demand before everything ends.”

“That sounds a little dramatic,” Terri said.

Chester looked at her. “If there was time to get to know me, you would discover that I never exaggerate. When I say everything, I mean everything.”

Max leaned forward. “Okay. So, what is everything?”

“The world. Humanity. Life. Everything.” Chester replied.

Terri shook her head. “Still sounds a little dramatic to me.”

Chester twisted the steering wheel into a tight turn, nearly tipping the cart over, and drove into the open doors of a brightly lit hangar.

“You won’t think I’m being dramatic when everything ceases to exist.”

Chapter 26

Chester stopped the cart abruptly and stepped off of it. “Follow me,” he shot over his shoulder as he headed for a door.

Max and Terri glanced at each other and then followed him through the door into a small office.

Inside was a small conference table with three chairs. Chester was already sitting in one of them and had opened his bag and was stuffing orange puffs into his mouth. “Close the door please, Max.”

Max shut the door and he heard it lock. He tried the handle, but the door refused to open. He spun around and glared at Chester. “Why is the door locked? Are we your prisoners or something?”

Chester pushed away the bag. “Something like that, yes. But you are no more a prisoner here than I am. Please, sit down.”

Terri sat down. “What do you mean you’re a prisoner here?”

“How much did the general tell you?” Chester asked.

She glanced at Max. Her eyes were filled with fear, causing him to sit down quickly. She looked back at Chester. “He said that someone had taken over the United States missile defense system and is threatening to use it unless we do what they say. He said that was the real reason the planes were grounded. To keep anyone from being shot down before we had the chance to do as they asked.”

Chester watched her carefully. “Did he tell you who had taken control of the missiles?”

She shook her head. “No. I assumed it was terrorists.”

Chester laughed unexpectedly. “We should be so lucky.”

Max frowned. “If it wasn’t terrorists, then who hijacked the missiles?”

Chester stared at Max for a full minute before responding with

the last thing Max ever expected him to say.

"Aliens."

The Adventure Continues…

Season One - Episode 2

The Shadow's Spark

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